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Iran: Decline in Air Force Capability

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J. H. Langley

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Iran:
Decline in Air Force Capability ☐

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Summary

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The effectiveness of Iran's Air Force has seriously eroded since the ouster of the Shah, largely because of a purge of pilots, a drastic reduction in pilot training, inadequate maintenance of aircraft, and a shortage of spare parts. ☐

The Air Force's problems have been exacerbated by civilian authorities and military chiefs in Tehran who have failed to establish operational standards and long-range goals. Iran's advanced F-14 fighters appear to be the most seriously affected by these problems. ☐

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☐ Iran will rely more on its older F-4 and F-5 fighter aircraft, but they too have severe problems ☐

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Iran:
Decline in Air Force Capability ☐

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F-14 Activity

Problems with equipment and maintenance have continued this year to disrupt regular flight operations of Iran's 76 F-14 fighters. ☐

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Inadequate crew training has handicapped the F-14 program from its inception. Fewer than 100 pilots were trained to fly the F-14 before the Revolution, and only three completed the entire combat training course. None of the weapon systems officers for the F-14 had advanced beyond the first phase of training, which covered only simple intercepts, that is, firing one missile at a time against a single target. ☐

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Equipment problems have had a major impact on the F-14 program, sometimes forcing ground crews to adopt extraordinary measures. Because of a severe shortage of spare parts and inadequate maintenance, the Air Force has been forced to cannibalize many of the F-14s. In fact, some F-14s

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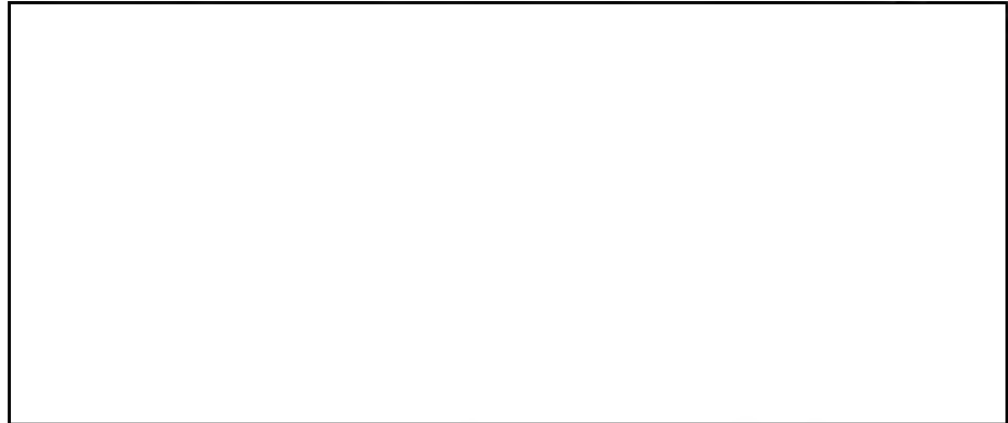
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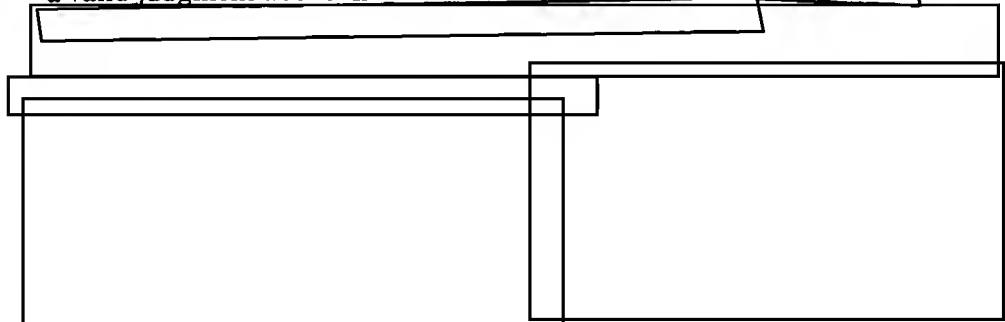
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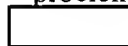


Although Iran is having problems with its F-14s, the evidence does not allow a valid judgment about the number now operational/



Iranian Air Force commanders probably recognize that, given the shortage of combat-capable F-14 pilots and the absence of realistic combat training, continued frequent operation of the aircraft would further weaken the aircraft while contributing virtually nothing to national defense. Few of the flyable aircraft are thought to be combat ready. Despite this predicament, the government has indicated that it will keep the aircraft in the inventory, at least for the near future, rather than sell them to another country. Keeping these aircraft more or less in limbo, however, will not ensure their availability in a future crisis, because lack of use by itself induces technical problems, especially with sophisticated subsystems like those on the F-14.

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F-4 and F-5 Activity

Iran's other fighter aircraft, F-4s and F-5s, have suffered similar problems, but they have been less serious, and these fighters certainly would present a greater threat to enemy aircraft than the F-14s. On the one hand, their effectiveness has been limited by inadequate flight time, a purge of pilots, and a fear of too quickly exhausting the spare-parts inventory provided by the United States. We estimate that flight activity may be at only about 10 to 20 percent of the pre-Revolution level. On the other hand, such activity

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[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] F-4 and F-5 pilots and technicians are more numerous and experienced than those trained on F-14s, primarily because the F-4s and F-5s have been in Iran for more than 10 years. [REDACTED]

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About half of the 190 F-4s and more than half of the 135 F-5s in the inventory are thought to be operational. (Spare parts problems for the F-5 are not as severe as those for the F-4.) The combat readiness of these aircraft is difficult to determine and varies considerably from base to base. Those at

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[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

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The Air Force is probably using only its best pilots and aircraft for these flights. This limits the risks while guaranteeing that the most capable pilots would be ready in the event of hostilities. [REDACTED]

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Other Aircraft

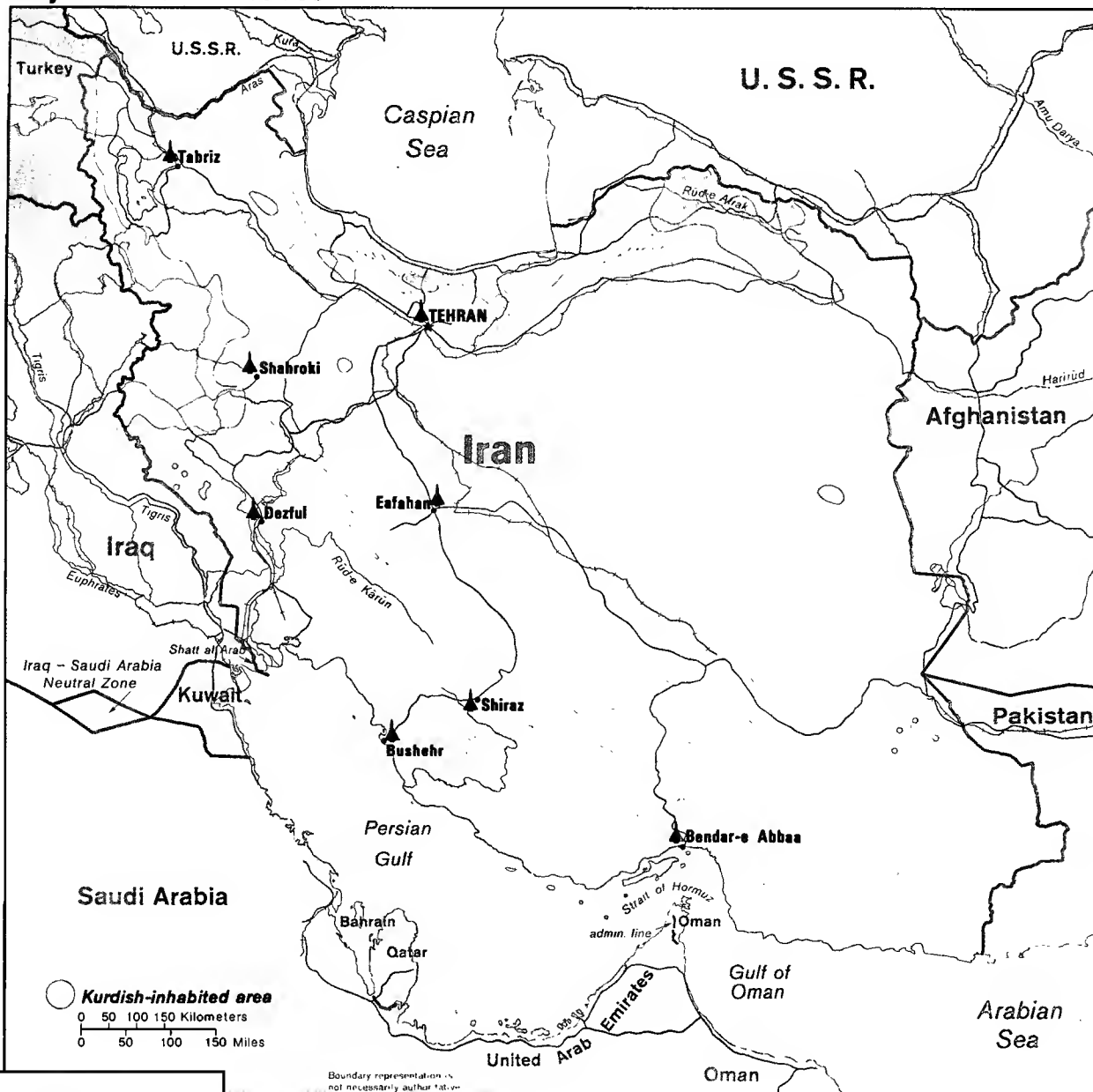
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Major Iranian Airbases



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**Prospects**

Unless there is a major political change in Tehran, the Iranian Air Force faces a bleak future, during which even normal training flights will become increasingly hazardous. In the event of hostilities, Iran would be able to rely on only a small core of proficient pilots and combat-ready fighter aircraft. These pilots and aircraft probably would be hard pressed to carry out intensive combat operations against any plausible enemy air force for more than a few days.

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Iran's fleet of F-14s currently does not pose a serious combat threat, and the Air Force is likely to continue to limit the number of F-14 sorties except, perhaps, when there is a major threat. Regardless of the amount of F-14 activity, however, the government will be forced to face critical questions about how to obtain desperately needed spare parts and technical assistance. Pilot proficiency will deteriorate further, and spare-parts shortages will force even more cannibalization. At the current rate of deterioration, few, if any, of Iran's F-14s will be airworthy beyond the end of this year.

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The Air Force will probably continue to fly some of its F-4 and F-5 fighters at the current low but steady rate to ensure that at least the best pilots will be ready for combat. Iran will try to obtain additional aircraft and spare parts as well as assistance with maintenance, primarily from Western Europe, using both overt and clandestine methods. As the country becomes more isolated, these efforts may become prohibitively difficult.

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Even if the Air Force is able to keep a number of its aircraft flying, it will have to overcome other major hurdles to become an effective military organization. Political committees at Air Force bases still handicap military commanders, morale is low, dissension and mistrust within the service are strong, and there is a shortage of experienced senior officers. []

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Perhaps the greatest problem for the Air Force—and for the entire Iranian armed forces—is the absence of a clear sense of direction and mission. []

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[] the current regime has failed to establish national goals and standards for the military, leaving base commanders to establish their own training programs and operational priorities. This lack of direction probably will be reflected in uneven or erratic training. []

Even at this stage, Iran's Air Force probably could not defeat Iraq in a major air war, and its capability will probably continue to decline in the months ahead. Maintenance problems and inadequate training will hamper efforts to reverse the trend. Of equal or even greater importance will be the weakness of Tehran's overall management of the Air Force. If the current regime remains in power, the Air Force may well not be a credible defense force against any conceivable air threat by mid-1981. []

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